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Problems of Political Development in South Vietnam Over the Next Year or So

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PROBLEMS OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH VIETNAM OVER THE NEXT YEAR OR SO

CONCLUSIONS

A. Over the last 18 months, there have been a number of favorable developments in the South Vietnamese political scene: the Ky-Thieu regime has successfully ridden out a series of crises; it has shown an ability to fashion reasonably acceptable compromises of troublesome issues; a Constituent Assembly has been elected; the military and civilian leaders have demonstrated an increasing willingness to work together. The longer the process continues, the more difficult it may become to reverse it by a single sudden move. Finally, the US presence has contributed significantly to stability, and the improved military situation adds generally to a better political climate.

B. Nevertheless, South Vietnam is still plagued by important political weaknesses: divisive regional animosities, religious enmities, civilian-military rivalries, and factionalism within the military. Over the next year, crises are bound to occur, particularly as the process of developing a constitution and moving toward a more permanent form of government unfolds. No assurance can be given that some crisis might not undo the political progress made to date.

C. On balance, we believe that the Constituent Assembly will succeed in drafting a constitution. If so, political maneuvering for new national elections may actually exacerbate the basic factors which threaten political stability. Nonetheless, we believe the chances are better than even that national elections will be conducted successfully during the period of this estimate.

D. If presidential elections are held, the military would probably find it easier to maintain unity behind a military candidate (or a military man who resigned in order to run). It is not clear, however,

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whether the military considers it essential that a military leader occupy the presidential seat or whether a civilian would be acceptable. Much would depend on which civilian. The election of a candidate who was opposed by the military leadership would raise the chances of a military coup attempt. Whether or not such an attempt succeeded, political development would have received a serious setback.

E. Even if a relatively smooth transition to an elected government can be achieved, continuing political stability cannot be maintained without military unity and support. The military is probably more cohesive and certainly commands greater resources than any other group in the country. Thus for some time to come, any regime in South Vietnam will be dependent on military support and almost certainly under strong military influence.

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DISCUSSION

I. INTRODUCTION

1. When South Vietnam achieved independence in 1954, it was already burdened with certain basic liabilities. Despite a deep sense of Vietnamese identity, there was no corresponding commitment to a concept of national government. Virtually no preparation for self government had been made during the decades of French rule. Not only was the country partitioned at the 17th parallel, but South Vietnam itself was also divided by ethnic, religious, regional, and other conflicts. Under the Diem regime, though some political stability was for a time achieved, little progress was made in resolving these basic problems. Moreover, a new threat emerged as it became apparent that Hanoi was determined to wage a revolutionary war against the South. Thus, when the Diem regime was toppled in late 1963, its various successors found no adequate base on which to build a stable government and faced a rapidly deteriorating military situation. One regime after another rose, quickly floundered, and fell.

2. By early 1965, the South Vietnamese Government—beset by military defeats, deprived of control of large sections of the countryside, incapable of effective bureaucratic performance, and ruling over a population in varying degrees indifferent, resentful, and deeply divided—seemed in danger of imminent collapse. The vastly expanded US presence in South Vietnam, civilian as well as military, has retrieved this situation. In particular, the buildup of US combat forces was viewed by South Vietnamese as evidence of US determination to see the war through and to prevent a Communist victory. Thus bolstered, the Ky regime which assumed power in June 1965 has had more room to maneuver and has retained control far longer than any other regime since the fall of Diem.

3. These circumstances have given the government new strengths, although it remains subject to most of the same stresses and weaknesses as its predecessors. Like them, it must operate within the limits of a domestic political situation established as the result of Diem's downfall. On the one hand, the military leadership assumed the reins of power while lacking the cohesiveness and single-mindedness that had enabled the Diem regime to establish its tightly-knit, centrally-controlled power structure. On the other hand, Diem's overthrow also unleashed still other political forces—the religious sects (principally the Buddhists), the students, labor, and a variety of politicians and intellectuals. Since Diem's overthrow, political developments have focused on two basic issues: the relative roles and power positions of these forces in the new body politic, and the pace and nature of the transition to a more broadly-based constitutional government. In varying degrees, these issues precipitated or underlay each of the political crises since 1963.

II. MAJOR SOURCES OF WEAKNESS

4. *Regionalism.* South Vietnam has long been plagued by regional animosities. Native Southerners (Cochinchinese) generally regard those of Northern (Ton-

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kinese) origin as "carpetbaggers," who wield power within the government and the military establishment far out of proportion to their numbers. In addition, those native to Central Vietnam (Annamites) are viewed with suspicion by both Northerners and Southerners. These regional antipathies hamper efforts to forge truly national South Vietnamese institutions. In one way or another, regional biases intrude into most of South Vietnam's problems and touch all groups, including the military, where factionalism is often on regional lines. In short, regionalism remains a basic weakness of Vietnamese politics and shows no indication of becoming less divisive in the near future.

5. *Religion.* Political developments during the Diem period and particularly since 1963 have created deep suspicions between South Vietnam's badly split Buddhist majority and its active but less factionalized Catholic minority. The Buddhists and the Catholics mistrust each other's influence in government and each fears the emergence of a government dominated by the other. This rivalry is of less immediate importance, however, than the political role of the militant wing of the Buddhist movement led by Thich Tri Quang, an adept and wily political tactician.[1] Although the militant Buddhists were weakened by their failure to topple Ky last spring and by their unsuccessful boycott of the Constituent Assembly elections, they remain a likely source of trouble. They still seem to constitute the largest body within organized Buddhism and may in time be able to reunite the Buddhists under their control. In any event, they still possess a substantial political base in the northern provinces of South Vietnam, from which they could reenter the political arena if they wished. In the shorter run, there remains a possibility of a new round of militant Buddhist demonstrations, given their assets among the students and the remnants of last spring's "struggle movement."

6. *Civilian-Military Rivalry.* The relationship between the military and civilian elements is fragile; neither group particularly respects the intentions or competence of the other. As the ultimate arbiter of power, the military is sometimes prone to ignore civilian interests. For their part, the civilian politicians tend to overreact to real or imagined provocations and thereby run the risk of needlessly precipitating reaction by the military. Frictions between the military and various civilian groups are unavoidable. There will almost certainly be occasional events which will threaten to burgeon into a serious civilian-military confrontation.

7. *Military Factionalism.* Factionalism has been chronic among Vietnamese military leaders, and plots and counterplots, personal rivalries, and jealousies have been common. This lack of cohesiveness among the military leaders has presented nonmilitary opponents of the government tempting opportunities to strike alliances with discontented commanders. The command structure itself

[1] Tri Quang's base of power is in Central Vietnam, particularly around Hue. The more flexible wing of the Buddhist Institute, led by Thich Tam Chau, is strongest in the Saigon area; much of its strength is based on Buddhists originally from North Vietnam. In addition, there are many Buddhists, including most of those from the southern provinces, who do not participate in the Buddhist Institute.

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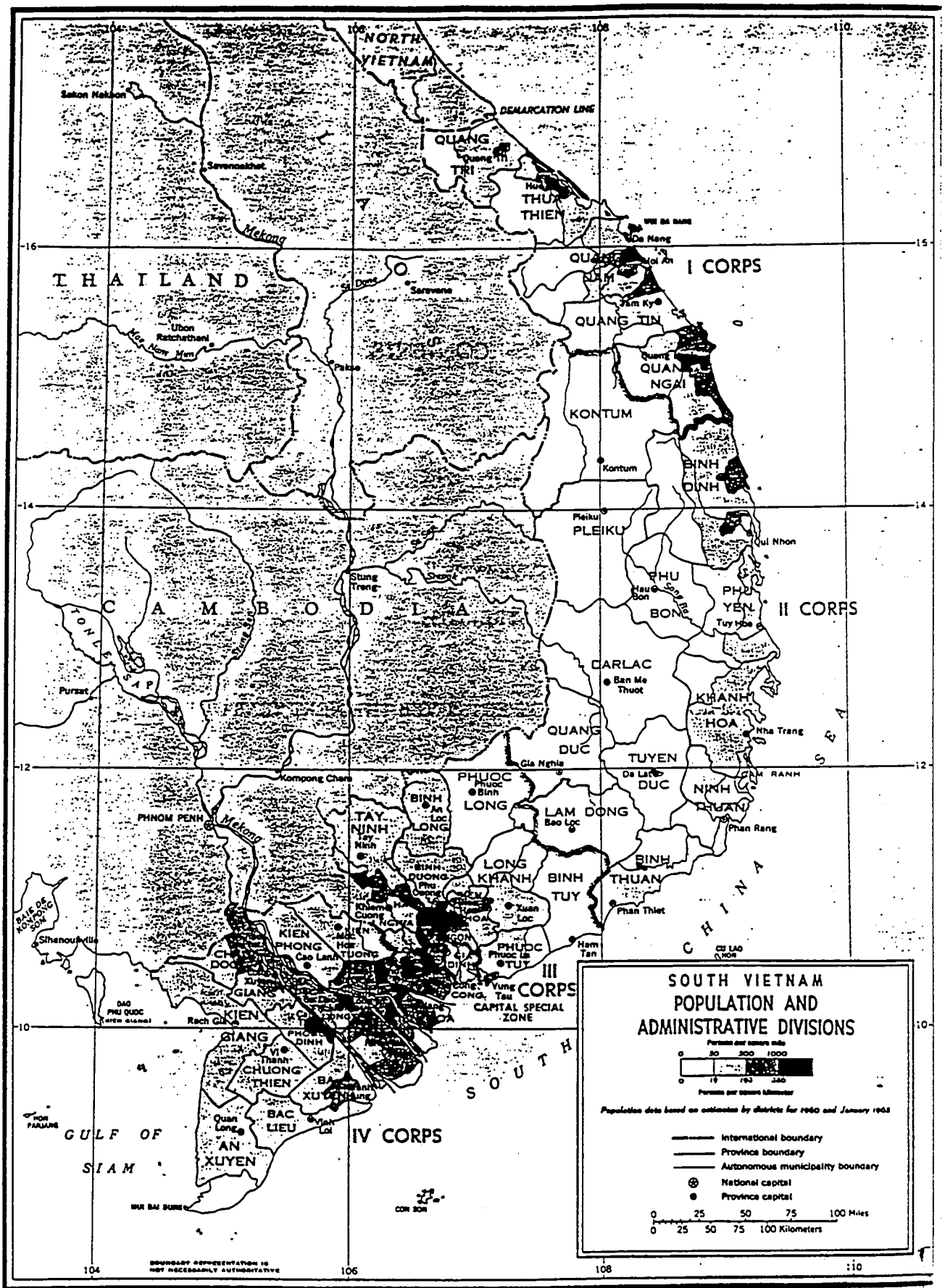

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is conducive to factionalism, since it has allowed the Corps Commanders to run their areas as personal satrapies.

8. *Lack of National Awareness.* As a result of the factionalism and parochialism which characterizes politics in Vietnam, there is little awareness of broad national issues. There is nothing approaching a national political party. Most politicians think primarily in terms of advancing their own or their group's interests. Moreover, activity by the multiplicity of political groups is generally restricted to urban areas, with the rank-and-file support seldom extending beyond personal and group loyalties. The rural peasantry, which constitutes the bulk of the population, has been largely unconcerned and unaffected by the political developments in Saigon.

9. *Inflation.* Among the many economic problems, inflation presents the greatest threat to governmental security. For over a year, South Vietnam has been gripped by severe inflation, caused in part by the large war-related budget deficit and in part by heavy US spending also caused by the war. Since January 1965, the cost of living has increased by over 125 percent. Despite the salutary effects of the regime's recent currency devaluation, the cost of living during 1967 will jump by at least another 20 percent, and probably by much more. Although the effects of inflation fall most heavily on the urban population, the rural areas also suffer difficulties which are often compounded by disruptions in the supply and distribution system. In general, inflation has increased dissatisfaction with the government and has provided the Viet Cong and other opponents with an exploitable popular issue.

10. *Bureaucratic Inadequacies.* South Vietnam has failed to develop an effective bureaucracy and administrative apparatus. There has been a separation of authority from responsibility; military officers administer most programs at the province and district levels, and the ministries have little control over them. Government procedures tend to be both rigid and cumbersome. Moreover, many trained individuals have been reluctant to work with the government, preferring instead to remain uninvolved. The succession of regimes and coups has resulted in frequent reorganizations, many of them inspired by political considerations rather than concern with increased efficiency, and has made many competent administrators politically unacceptable. It has also made them hesitant to commit themselves to a regime, out of fear that its tenure and their own were likely to be of short duration. In addition, corruption is rampant throughout the system, and its corrosive effect not only impedes government activities but adversely affects attitudes toward the government.

11. *The War.* These various problems would obstruct political development even in peacetime. The war, however, exacerbates every problem, magnifies every weakness, and makes even the simplest tasks of governing exceedingly difficult. Viet Cong control of large parts of the country, and varying degrees of insecurity elsewhere, greatly restrict the ability of the government to carry forward programs of social and economic development. Finally, the refugees who have fled from the countryside to the cities, and who may number a million

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in Saigon alone, add to the administrative burdens of the regime and may provide an object for exploitation by its enemies, including of course the Viet Cong.

III. MAJOR SOURCES OF STRENGTH

12. *Consensus on the War.* A significant and often overlooked source of strength in South Vietnam is the consistently anti-Communist attitude of the country's politically active elements. Despite concern over various GVN policies toward war and peace and over the impact of the large US involvement in Vietnamese affairs, none has called for an end to the fighting or a withdrawal of US forces. The many governmental shakeups that have taken place have not been over basic policy concerning the continuation of the war or over the GVN's steadfast refusal to deal with the Communists. Thus the Communists have been denied the opportunity of gaining power through the back door in league with other South Vietnamese groups. Anticommunism is strongest among the Catholics and military, many of whom fled from communism in North Vietnam in 1954.

13. *Continuity of Government.* The Ky regime has now survived for 18 months. This remarkable longevity, reversing what appeared to be a persistent trend toward ever-changing, short-lived governments, has had positive psychological effects at home and abroad which have been reinforced by the impact of US military operations. The government has at least had time to begin implementing a number of major programs which heretofore had progressed little beyond the planning stage. Progress has been limited, and much of the emphasis and initiative has come from the US and US prodding. Nevertheless, Ky and his advisors have demonstrated greater insight into the issues facing them and have shown greater flexibility in adopting remedial measures.

14. *Political Continuity.* Politically, the regime has also profited from its ability to maintain itself in power, especially from its success in facing down both militant Buddhist opposition and military plotting. Most politically active Vietnamese viewed the September elections for the Constituent Assembly as an earnest of the regime's willingness to sanction a larger civilian role in the government; about 80 percent of those registered and over 50 percent of the total adult population of South Vietnam voted, despite the opposition of both the militant Buddhists and the Viet Cong. The cabinet crisis in October demonstrated the persistence of regional rivalries, but the regime managed to dilute the impact of this episode. In any event, increasing numbers of politicians are probably coming to feel that there is political advantage in coexisting with the Ky regime as long as they see reasonable prospects for a transition to elected government.

15. *Political Development.* For the first time since Diem's downfall, political activity is manifested more in legal channels than in demonstrations and coup plotting. This political activity, while creating a raft of new frictions and problems, is essential and healthy in terms of political development. Moreover, the military leadership, which will remain the final arbiter of power in any case,

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is actively taking part in this political evolution. Borrowing from the experience of the South Korean military, the Ky regime is seeking to find political means to insure the military's participation in any future government. With this insurance, they appear to be prepared to accept an elected government with a constitutional mandate; such a development would be a promising step toward the creation of a government with a popular national base.

16. *US Support.* Obviously crucial in the military and economic fields, the greatly increased US presence has injected a new element of major importance into the South Vietnamese body politic. The US role carries great weight among the Vietnamese, so much so in fact that even inaction by the US is a form of involvement or, at the very least, has the same impact by being seen as such. For example, several previous regimes became vulnerable when their opponents suspected that US support was weakening. Ky's regime is strengthened by the fact that most Vietnamese consider the US to be solidly behind it. The expanding US presence has obviously increased the disruptive effect of the war on the Vietnamese economy, and there are some latent anti-American sentiments. These negative factors are likely to be aggravated by the infusion of larger numbers of US troops into the more heavily populated areas of the country. Nevertheless, the overall effect of the US presence has thus far been to contribute significantly to stability.

IV. CURRENT SITUATION

17. *The Directorate.* During the past year, the Directorate strengthened its position within the military establishment, enhanced its standing in the country, and preserved a considerable degree of cohesiveness. The successful removal of two deeply entrenched Corps Commanders, Generals Thi and Quang, added to the stature of both Ky and Thieu. The precise relationship between these two leaders is not clear, but Ky certainly has the leading public role. He also draws strength from the aura of US support, from the air force which he still commands, and from a group of younger officers called the Baby Turks. This latter group includes General Loan, Director of Police and Chief of Military Security and a close confidant of Ky's, and General Khang, Commander of III Corps and the Capital Military Zone. This combination has provided physical security for the Ky regime.

18. There are persistent rumors of friction between Thieu and Ky, though we see no evidence that such friction is now of serious proportions. But the future cohesiveness of the Directorate depends to a great extent on the cooperation, or at least continuing mutual tolerance, of these two officers.

19. *The Constituent Assembly.* Except for the Buddhist Institute, all the traditional political, regional, and religious groups are reflected in the 117-member Constituent Assembly. The Assembly includes professional politicians, representatives of the Dai Viet and VNQDD parties (badly split themselves), regionalists (such as the militant Movement for the Renaissance of the South), and a large number of young and inexperienced delegates. Four political "blocs"

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were formed for the election of Assembly officers and committees, but each is a conglomerate of differing interests, and their membership and the lines between them continue to shift.

20. For the next few months at least, the Assembly will be the source of the issues on which the civilian politicians and the regime will confront one another. The Directorate has not yet shown its hand, but its military members would almost certainly resist any move which would deprive them of a constitutional role in a new government. The precise goals of the civilians are not clear. In general, however, they distrust the Directorate and appear to believe that the time is ripe for the creation of a constitutional government with a much larger role for the civilian elements. The September elections whetted their political appetites, and since the military gave up some political power then, the civilians are pressing for more. Their motives range from parochial self-interest to genuine concern for a legitimate government. The many divisions and rivalries within the Assembly will impair its ability to present a solid front against the Directorate.

21. There are a number of potential problems that could lead to an open break, either by design or by accident, between the Assembly and the Directorate. The Assembly will continue to interpret its mandate for constitution-drafting broadly, while the Directorate will be suspicious of incursions into its domain of power. There is considerable resentment in the Assembly over the power of the Directorate to change items in the draft constitution, reversible only by a two-thirds vote of the Assembly. The regime, for its part, is reluctant to relinquish this power until it has a fairly good idea of what will be in the constitution. The desire of some Assembly members to retain the Assembly in being until the convocation of an elected legislature may also cause friction with the Directorate.

22. There are, however, factors that could lead toward compromise. The majority of the Assembly members probably are not interested in pursuing a collision course with the government, in large part because they realize that if the Assembly fails, they are unlikely for some time to have another chance of sharing power. Moreover, there may be many who will advocate caution in the expectation that the very establishment of a constitutional system, even if it is not fully in accord with their desires, will provide new opportunities for change. The Directorate also has reason to try to avoid a showdown. It probably believes that the real test is not so much the question of a constitution but that of power afterwards, and it is aware of the US concern that there be a constitution. Within limits, the regime will probably try to be forthcoming on this matter. On balance, we believe that an open break between the Directorate and the Assembly will be avoided and that a constitution will be produced.

23. Although we consider it unlikely that the Ky regime will be overthrown during the near future, its downfall could seriously endanger the promulgation of a constitution as well as the political progress made to date. Much would depend on how Ky was overthrown and what sort of regime succeeded him.

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Progress would not necessarily be wholly lost, for example, if Ky were overthrown by an internal palace coup with a minimum of violence and disruption, or if the new regime were no less disposed to work toward constitutional government. Should the coup be violent, however, or should there be a series of coups and countercoups, the whole structure created by past political development would almost certainly disintegrate.

V. PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OVER THE NEXT YEAR OR SO

24. Judgments concerning the course of political development in South Vietnam must be highly tentative. The country is in the throes of political evolution, the course of which will be disputed even after a constitution is adopted. In a very real sense, political development in South Vietnam will be a day-to-day, month-to-month phenomenon for some time to come, and periodic upheavals and crises will threaten the entire process. Indeed, as the pace of political events quickens, the factors that work against stability may actually be exacerbated. Regionalism in particular is likely to be a politically volatile factor. The Southern elements are resentful of the Northern/Central coloration of Ky's regime and fear that Ky and Loan are conniving to perpetuate it at Southern expense. No assurance can be given that some crisis might not prove to be the ultimate undoing of the government.

25. A falling out among the military leaders could have serious consequences. As political activity increases, the possibility of frictions between Ky and Thieu also increases. Ky has thus far been skillful and fortunate in his efforts to contain the political power of individual Corps Commanders; on a future occasion, he might be less successful. The question of how much political power is to be shared with the civilian elements might become a cause of contention within the military, particularly since the Baby Turks appear to be less inclined to compromise with the civilians than is the Directorate.

26. The prospect of negotiations could introduce unsettling influences into the political situation over the next year or so. At present, no significant Vietnamese group publicly advocates negotiations and the military leaders are quite opposed to them except on terms that amount to Communist capitulation. Hence, any government that, in the near term, agreed to negotiations would increase its vulnerability to attack by its political enemies. On the other hand, the large US presence may encourage the Vietnamese to believe that the US will agree to no settlement that does not effectively insure the survival of a non-Communist SVN. The degree to which this confidence would remain as a counterweight to disruptive effects would depend heavily on the circumstances in which negotiations seemed an imminent possibility.

27. Nevertheless, there are developments which tend to make us cautiously optimistic about the prospects for a more stable political situation. These include the continuity of the Ky regime, its success in riding out a series of crises and potential crises, and its ability to fashion reasonably acceptable compromises without resorting to outright repression. In addition, the election of a Con-

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stituent Assembly, and the willingness of both the military leadership and civilian elements to attempt to work together augur well for continued political progress. The longer the process continues and is reflected in the development of new institutions and working relations, the more difficult it may become to reverse it by some single sudden move. Finally, the improved military situation contributes generally to a better political climate.

28. During the next year or so, the successful holding of national elections would be an important indication of growing political stability. Actually, events are moving in this direction; a constitution will almost certainly call for presidential elections, and probably legislative ones as well. Political maneuvering among the various civilian elements is already underway in anticipation of elections and will grow more intense. New political alliances will eventually emerge, although it is too early to determine what they are likely to be. The Directorate's final decision concerning elections will depend on its assessment of the situation at the time; if the military felt that elections seriously threatened their basic interests, they might move to postpone them. But we believe the chances are better than even that national elections will be conducted successfully during the period of this estimate.

29. If presidential elections are held, there will probably be a military candidate (or a military man who has resigned in order to run), perhaps Ky or Thieu, as well as civilian candidates. It is not clear whether the military considers it essential that a military leader occupy the presidential seat or whether a civilian would be acceptable. Much of course would depend on the civilian. The military would probably find it easier to maintain unity behind a military candidate. The election of a candidate who was opposed by the military leadership would raise the chances of a military coup attempt. Whether or not such an attempt succeeded, political development would have received a serious setback.

30. Even assuming a relatively smooth transition to an elected government, continuing political stability cannot be maintained without military unity and support. There is little evidence of any significant growth of a sense of national commitment that would submerge special interests. Civilian-military and other rivalries will persist and will manifest themselves in recurring conflicts over the distribution of power within the government. Any government, particularly a civilian one, will almost certainly be subject to debilitating bickering and jockeying for influence, and vulnerable to plots from within and without. As long as the military leadership remains relatively united, it will have the upper hand over others. It is probably more cohesive and certainly commands greater resources than any other group in the country. Thus for some time to come, any regime in South Vietnam will be dependent on military support and almost certainly under strong military influence.

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